

## **“That Makes Them Look All Manner of Stupid;” Psychology and “The Train Job”**

Sherry Ginn

Whereas an entire course in General Psychology is designed to help students understand how psychologists attempt to answer the question “Why do people act the way they do,” one chapter in an introductory textbook specifically addresses various theories about this issue of motivation. In order to engage student interest in yet more theories about behavior and mental processes, I screen the episode “The Train Job” from Joss Whedon’s short-lived series *Firefly*. After the screening I present the various theories described in the student’s textbook—drive reduction theory, incentive theory, arousal theory, and Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs—illustrating each theory with the series’ characters and their motives for participating in the heist. For example, Captain Reynolds’ motivation for the robbery could be attributed to each of the theories: (1) drive reduction—his crew has to eat; (2) incentive—he gets to “stick it” to the Alliance; (3) arousal—he gets to make the Alliance look stupid; and (4) Hierarchy of Needs—he can provide for the basic physiological and safety needs of his crew, as well as continuing to solidify his reputation as a person who “gets things done.” Following this exercise, students have a better appreciation of how the theories actually work in “real life” and, even better, more *Firefly* fans are created, which one might say is my motivation for using Joss Whedon’s television series to illustrate psychological concepts.